Nuclear Disarmament: The Case Against

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1. Introduction

As US President Barack Obama outlined his ambitious vision of a world without nuclear weapons, this essay proposes to analyse whether nuclear disarmament is indeed a more serious policy option today than at the dawn of the atomic age in 1945 or at the height of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.[1]

The term disarmament is difficult to define. Wight points out that it may refer to abolishing nuclear weapons, reducing their number or limiting or restricting their kinds and uses.[2] The debate below will concentrate on the former meaning, given that the interest in the complete elimination of nuclear weapons is just as old and controversial as the technology itself.

In the light of this clarification, the discussion will maintain that a full nuclear disarmament has never been a viable policy idea. The logic behind the argument rests on two well-worn truisms. Firstly, nuclear weapons can no longer be wished away. Once invented, they will continue to punctuate the course of history. Secondly, given the anarchical conditions of the international scene, states will constantly feel constrained to pursue their security needs and nuclear weapons are the ultimate means to accomplishing that goal.

Following on from the two arguments I shall seek to demonstrate that irrespective of any shifting political dynamics, a zero nuclear world cannot be a reliable option. And even if the idea were to rally whole-hearted support, the challenges of enshrining it into law and enforcing it are so manifold and onerous that it would render it impracticable.

To demonstrate why the abolition of nuclear weapons cannot be an alternative to the status quo, this paper proposes to examine two aspects: the political context which led to nuclear proliferation and the legal disincentives which restrict or seek to eliminate nuclear weapons.

The final section will briefly review the arguments and conclude that the abolition of nuclear weapons cannot be a viable policy alternative because existing political and legal obstacles outweigh the political will to accomplish such a vision.

2. 1. Political Challenges

Since the first atomic tests in New Mexico 64 years ago, the history of nuclear weapons witnessed two phases. The old period which coincided with the cold war was the era of nuclear juggernauts. As Freedman pointed out in a recent article, the United States and the Soviet Union developed tens of thousands of warheads while constantly perfecting their technology to ensure that any surprise first strike would result in a terrible retribution.[3] Despite the ideological rift between the two superpowers, peace was possible because both were capable of deterring the other from launching a devastating attack.

The end of the cold war ushered in a new period characterised by a shift from bipolarity to multipolarity, a reduction in nuclear arsenals, as well as emerging challenges such as terrorism, criminality, ethnic and religious tensions.

Both periods witnessed moments of tension and calm. During the cold war spells of fearful suspense over the outcome of heated confrontations between the US and its rival the Soviet Union gave way to bouts of hopeful anticipation. The emergence of nuclear weapons, the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Cuban missile crisis, when the world came within a whisker of nuclear war, were such overwhelming events that the world was left reeling in shock. Yet, the same events opened windows of opportunity for politicians and scientists to consider the abolition of nuclear weapons as a serious option.

Noel-Baker argues that in 1945, in the aftermath of the Trinity Test and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 'not a single voice was raised' against proposals by the United Nations that atomic weapons should be 'eliminated from national armaments'.[4] The following year, the United States produced the Baruch Plan – a document which envisaged the elimination of atomic weapons from national armaments once it had been implemented and the transfer of control of nuclear facilities to an international authority.[5] The plan however failed to prove credible with the Soviets who suspected that the US which held the nuclear monopoly was plotting to keep them out of the atomic club.[6]

If disarmament was ever meant to succeed, the short period between August 1945 and June 1946 when Bernard Baruch presented his plan to the recently established United National Atomic Energy Commission (UNAEC) would have probably been the most propitious moment. This can be explained on two accounts. Firstly, the technology was still restricted to the US, making it possible, according to US scientists, to contain it 'before the already launched atomic race attain[ed] such a momentum that it c[ould] not be stopped'.[7] And secondly, the unanimous condemnation of nuclear weapons in the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki created the genuine will to ban the technology.[8]

But in a climate of mutual suspicion, where the US feared Moscow's pursuit of nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union was reluctant to accept any Western nuclear inspection as urged by the Baruch Plan and the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, the momentum was lost and the arms race followed its course. As Reiss argues, there were stronger factors at work which motivated Moscow and indeed all subsequent proliferators to seek nuclear weapons.[9] These could be summed up as security reasons, pursuit of prestige, an inexorable force in conquering technological obstacles and scientific and bureaucratic single-minded determination to acquire nuclear weapons.[10]

The Cuban missile crisis was a turning point in history, as the world tottered on the brink of nuclear war. But unlike 1945/46 when the US was the sole owner of a nuclear arsenal, by 1962 another three countries had joined the nuclear club. The event as well as additional concerns about the fallout from nuclear tests opened the door to a clutch of treaties including the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963 and the Treaty of Tlatelolco of 1967 which transformed Latin America into a nuclear weapons free continent.[11] But while South America abandoned its pursuit of nuclear weapons, Asia witnessed the beginning of a regional arms race in 1964, with China exploding the first atomic bomb.

As the nuclear club became bigger and the cold war followed its course, the abolition of the weapons seemed beyond achievement and, according to Walker, the dominant objective was by now 'to stabilise deterrence, curb the expansion of nuclear arsenals and stem proliferation'.[12]

The end of the cold war heralded a second atomic period. The US-Russian ambitious pledge to reduce arsenals to a ceiling of 1,500 warheads each as part of the START treaties and the extension of the landmark Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which envisions general and complete disarmament created a new climate for states to make a 'clear choice to enable the world to conduct its affairs without nuclear weapons'.[13]

Yet despite the rhetoric, the abolition of nuclear weapons remains a distant dream if nothing more.

The old fears which haunted the cold war may have disappeared, but they have been replaced by new challenges, ranging from terrorist threats, religious and ethnic tensions, international criminality to technological advances which could open the door for new generations of miniaturised nuclear weapons to be used in warfare.

Politically, the international scene is becoming increasingly multipolar, creating new security needs for states which

now fear attacks not only from other states but also from non-state actors in the form of terrorist organisations.

Walker argues that the retention of an overwhelming conventional capability might give the US the confidence to eliminate nuclear weapons.[14] This may not be feasible on three accounts.

Firstly, the US provides a nuclear umbrella to NATO members and its Asian allies South Korea and Japan. These may feel uncomfortable with the idea of being exposed to the whims of their nuclear-armed neighbour, North Korea, if the US decided to scrap its arsenal. Fearing for their security and ultimately for their survival, they might consider developing their own nuclear weapons to counteract the threat, thus swelling the ranks of nuclear proliferators.

Secondly, President Obama recently admitted that al Qaeda might obtain unsecured nuclear material which it can use to acquire a warhead to bomb heavily populated regions of the US.[15]

The mere possession of nuclear weapons might not prove a viable deterrent to terrorists, who follow a different logic and who do not take an interest in this form of bargaining. However, they remain a credible proof of prestige and power which the US can wield to impose its political will to restrict the unsecured nuclear material before it falls into the hands of terrorist organisations. In addition, even if nuclear weapons and their delivery systems can no longer deter terrorists or rogue states, they retain a strong defensive value. In a statement of 2001 pre-dating the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, Washington recognised the emerging terrorist threats and insisted it had a right to develop and deploy the means to 'protect against them [nuclear threats], including through limited missile defense of our territory'.[16]

Thirdly, should the US abolish its nuclear arsenal, it is doubtful that other states will follow suit, thus discouraging Washington from making the first step. Quinlan argues that a Russian or French renunciation of nuclear weapons is far-fetched.[17]

On the one hand, the idea of France as a nuclear power sits at the heart of her national self-awareness and self-confidence, making it highly unlikely that policy-makers in Paris decide to abandon the weapons. On the other hand, Russia is loath to eliminate its arsenal for geostrategic reasons. It fears the expansion of NATO right up to its borders and its neighbour, China – a rising superpower and a nuclear actor which may not wish to relinquish its stockpiles.[18] This, in turn will persuade India, also a rising power to retain its arsenal. If India resolves to stay nuclear it is unlikely that Pakistan, its old foe, would roll back.

Quinlan argues that of all the nuclear states, Britain is the least 'locked-in strategically' by such interactions.[19] And yet, British Defence Secretary John Hutton recently told a radio programme: 'Britain recognises the fundamental importance of a credible minimum deterrent'.[20]

If during the cold war nuclear weapons were seen as a source of power and prestige in addition to their ability to fulfil security needs, they have now acquired a new dimension. Cash-strapped countries such as Iran and North Korea are using them as a bargaining chip in their negotiations with other states. This means that negotiators will have to consider both political and economic factors when discussing with potential proliferators.

This paper has so far attempted to prove that politically nuclear disarmament has never been a viable option. Even the most intense moments of the cold war failed to compel states to follow such a path. Incentives such as fulfilling security needs, pursuit of prestige, technological determinism outweighed utopian visions of a nuclear-free world. The end of the cold war brought a new dynamic yet the incentives for nuclear proliferation remained. Moreover, there appeared new challenges which states must now face. Despite all these, visionaries such as President Obama are adamant that talk of disarmament is not just sloganeering but a reality which ought to be actively pursued. But how?

2.2 Legal Challenges

With all the talk for a zero nuclear world, anecdotally, there has never been a real attempt to ban the technology for good. Even the early documents – the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, the Baruch Plan – and the subsequent treaties –

the NPT, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) which may have created an opportunity for disarmament were phrased in such a way that they either aroused suspicions of bias in favour of the US or simply lacked any teeth in punishing those who may have been found in breach.

Another challenge refers to the dual-use nature of the nuclear material which may be used either for civilian or for military purposes. While the latter is banned, the former is allowed under the terms of the NPT and has the blessings of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Reiss points out that in March 1992, the Nuclear Suppliers Group tightened its guidelines to prohibit the export of nuclear-related dual-use technology while the Missile Technology Control Regime strengthened many of its export policies.[21] However, he concedes that there are key concerns regarding suppliers such as the US and Germany which might attempt 'to boost international competitiveness of domestic industries by ignoring or minimising their non-proliferation responsibilities'.[22]

McGwire argues that if complete denuclearisation were to succeed, states first have to agree on a common goal.[23] It is hard to see how this will be achieved. Historically, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – the US, UK, France, China and Russia – which are recognised as nuclear powers under the NPT have often played cat-and-mouse games with each other when important issues regarding nuclear disarmament have been mooted. The most recent examples refer to Iran where Russia and China have been trying to block the US, UK and France in their attempts to impose sanctions on the allegedly would-be proliferator.

Even if a common goal is accepted and states agree to 'accomplish the total elimination of nuclear disarmament, under which all states parties are committed under article VI [of the NPT]', another hurdle arises and this regards verification and compliance measures.[24]

These are disputable on at least two accounts. Historically, countries may feel uncomfortable with the idea of foreign inspections carried out on their territories. This paper has previously shown that the Soviet Union refused to back the Baruch Plan in 1946, as it became increasingly suspicious of suggestions that inspections be carried out on its facilities. Secondly, even if countries were to allow inspections, what guarantee is there that the evidence which is found will not be ignored?

The example of Iraq has shown that the US and Britain rode roughshod over evidence produced by professional inspectors in order to pursue their agenda.

And finally even if states were to disarm unilaterally what is the probability that one will not decide to buck the trend and re-acquire the technology? After all, as argued at the beginning of the discussion once the know-how exists, it can no longer be wished away. If states were to ban the bomb, they must equally consider introducing punitive measures to clamp down on anyone caught out breaking the rules. However, in the absence of an overarching international institution which could perform such a task, states may not feel compelled to observe the law.

3. Conclusion

The discussion has now come full circle. This paper argued in the introduction that complete disarmament cannot be a viable option on two accounts. Firstly, once invented the nuclear know-how cannot be wished away. Secondly, since the international scene remains an anarchical environment without an overarching government to maintain peace and order and punish law-breakers, states will have to fulfil their security needs even if that involved acquiring nuclear weapons.

Following on from this realist view, the essay discussed the potential for denuclearisation in the aftermath of three key moments: the dawn of the atomic age and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and the second atomic age from the end of the cold war in 1990 to the present day, with a particular stress on the recent US preoccupation with nuclear disarmament.

The analysis has shown that at a political level the abolition of the technology could not be feasible at any of the three moments listed above. There existed a desire to ban the weapons, as expressed in the documents and treaties produced following the three events, but these were outweighed by stronger security needs which had to be fulfilled. After the cold war, the old proliferation incentives – security reasons, pursuit of prestige, technological determinism – remained but there appeared new challenges. These ranged from terrorist threats, ethnic and religious tensions to technological progress which meant that new generations of mini nukes may be used in warfare. In the face of the new threats adding to the old incentives, disarmament remains a dream if nothing else.

At a legal level, although states did adopt an impressive raft of treaties and agreements, these were but small steps towards disarmament. Their vague wording and potential bias meant that they were often seen as powerless. The NPT recognises five established nuclear members but bans others from acquiring the technology. Moreover, it envisions nuclear disarmament in its Article VI but does not stipulate in firm terms the implementation of such a goal.[25]

With all the visionary charm of President Obama who craves a nuclear weapons free world, it is difficult to see how this can be achieved in the light of the arguments presented above.

Freedman said in his recent Financial Times article: 'there has never been a natural relationship between fewer [nuclear] weapons and more peace'.[26] And he is right. As long as there are security needs a zero reduction of nuclear weapons may imply a multiplication of conventional arms. If fear of the former has kept a frail peace, complacency about the latter may unleash wars. The world may not have had any experience of the former, but it had plenty of the latter.

[1] 'Obama sets goal of world without nuclear weapons', The Independent, 3 April 2009

[2] Wight, M. (1978) p.258

[3] Freedman, L. 'This new nuclear arms age has its own set of risks' in Financial Times, 8 April 2009

[4] Noel-Baker, P., (1958) p.182

[5] http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Deterrence/BaruchPlan.shtml

[6] http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/cwr/88100.htm

[7] http://www.learnworld.com/ZNW/LWText.Acheson- Lilienthal.html

[8] Noel-Baker, P. Loc.cit

[9] Reiss, M., (1994) in Nuclear Proliferation after the Cold War, p.336

[10] Id.

[11] http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Magazines/Bulletin/Bull394/tlatelolco.html

[12] Walker, W. (2008) 'Obama and Nuclear Disarmament' in IFRI Proliferation Papers, No.14

[13] http://www.dfat.gov.au/cc/cc_report_intro.html

[14] Walker, W., (2008) loc.cit.

[15] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7983963.stm

[16] http://web.archive.org/web/20020223065455/http:/www.state.gov/t/ac/rls/fs/2001/6848.htm

[17] Quinlan, M., (2000) in Alternative Nuclear Futures, p.47

[18] Id. p.48

[19] Id.

[20] 'Today programme', BBC4, 5th April 2009

[21] Reiss, M., (1994) p.344

[22] Id.

[23] MccGwire, M., (1994) in 'Alternative Nuclear Futures' p.162

[24] 2000, Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Final Document vol 1. New York in Walker, W., (2008) Loc.cit

[25] http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infcircs/Others/infcirc140.pdf

[26] Freedman, L., 'This new nuclear arms race has its own set of risks' in FT 8 April 2009

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Radio Resources

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